

Pedaling, and Protecting, New Hampshire Trails

Volunteers maintain, negotiate and hold potluck dinners.

By MATT FURBER

POLLEN erupted from the trees like smoke from a forest fire. We were resting with our bikes atop granite cliffs, looking out over the Saco River, taking a break from mountain biking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

For five days I joined riders from the New England Mountain Bike Association, traveling through the thick forest of their mountainous backyard. I was keen not only to test my mettle on the rocky, root-crisscrossed trails, but also to see how riders work with the United States Forest Service and others to maintain access for bikers.

"There is a strong land ethic here — people feel like they own the forest," said Terry Miller, a Saco District Forest Service Ranger. "They care about what happens to it."

Famed for their tightknit sense of community, the volunteer-riders of North Conway, N.H., include carpenters, teachers, a roofer, a chimney sweep, an accountant, health and fitness professionals, mechanics, salesmen and a false-teeth maker, all of whom enjoy a good ride and consider flesh wounds a source of pride.

Some trail volunteers have been quietly riding the White Mountains since the dawn of the mountain bike in the early 1980s, and they are at the forefront of a national trend of citizen riders. Officials are using the recreation work in the White Mountain National Forest as an example for stewardship in their own communities.

Like trail volunteers across the country, North Conway riders volunteer hundreds of hours each year maintaining trails and negotiating access, an on-going task.

"There never seems to be enough time to keep up with the trail work," said Tony Tulip, a rider and volunteer who has maintained trails for 10 years. "You can't keep a good forest down. We could use more help."

The fruits of the volunteers' work can be enjoyed by more riders than the locals, and out-of-towners who venture to

the trails, 65 miles northwest of Portland, Me., will discover a network painstakingly sculptured to suit mountain bike travel, with hand-built stone ramps and other inventive obstacles.

Visitors will be in good hands if they manage to hook up with knowledgeable hometown talent to guide them in the dense woods of the White Mountains. The willingness of local riders to share the trails is a testament to the stewardship legacy dating back to the Weeks Act of 1911, which originally established the public forest, the largest in the East, now at nearly 800,000 acres.

Riders can travel on old carriage paths and extensive railroad grades that lead to old quarries, logging roads and skid trails. Volunteers maintain more than 100 miles of trails on Forest Service land and dozens more miles on town and private lands.

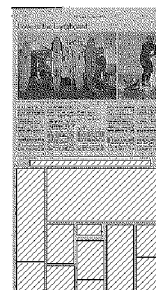
Passing the Christmas stores, Thai restaurants and a head shop on Route 16 in North Conway, bikers can start their adventures on Main Street to then plunge into the woods and mountains near the turn-offs for Mount Washington and Tuckerman Ravine.

On one of my first rides in the area, I joined Rob Adair, the president of the bike association's local chapter, and Scott Lee, a salesman of industrial water treatment technology.

Like a number of their mountain biking friends, they were initially drawn to North Conway for the rock climbing. Mr. Adair, who is a structural engineer, has been busy building bridges, not only over waterways but also within the community to improve riding in the area. Pedaling only a short distance from Mr. Adair's home in town, soon the three of us wound our way through the forest up the slopes of the Moat Mountains.

Activism in the mountain biking scene also makes for a vibrant social life — impromptu potlucks and barbecues are common.

"Quite honestly, I don't think we would ride as much if it wasn't for that group," Mr. Lee said. "I think the camaraderie is a big part of the whole sport for us. We had another potluck last Sat-



urday."

Upon my arrival in North Conway I found participants on the Friday-evening ride as they returned just after dark from an advanced circuit up the Red Tail Trail to Black Cap Peak. The Red Tail goes across land that belongs to the Nature Conservancy, the town and the waterworks.

"We flagged the trail and got the O.K. from the Conway Conservation Commission," said Mark Jenks, founding member and former president of the bike association's White Mountains chapter.

According to Conway's town manager, Earl Sires, the cooperation of public agencies, developers and private landowners has been central to maintaining trail networks. Acquisition of more conservation property through land swaps for construction of a number of big box stores and major highway projects has been part of the community's planning process, said Mr. Sires, who previously worked in the mountain biking nexus of Moab, Utah.

"Development is happening, but people appreciate all the open space — it is always a balance," Mr. Sires said.

Some riders have called North Conway the Moab of the East, even though it is a forest habitat rather than high desert. The area is more famous among road bikers because of the 7.6-mile Mount Washington Auto Road Bicycle Hillclimb every August, or the annual Crank the Kanc, a hill climb that takes place along the Kancamagus Highway in late May.

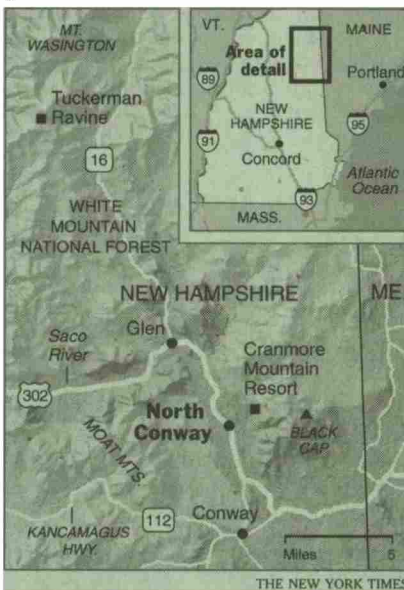
One popular trail that loops through town conservation land near the Cranmore Mountain Resort is called Sticks and Stones because it is a twisting technical course. I flew over the handlebars early riding with Mr. Adair and Jean Huemmler, Mr. Lee's wife. She used to work in the backcountry huts of the White Mountains, an experience that led to 16 years adventuring in the mountains in Utah. Brushing off the tumble, I soon found myself absorbed, riding beneath the beautiful canopy of deciduous trees that covered us like an umbrella. We meandered through the landscape, over rickety old wooden bridges, past a huge granite column and iron lathe equipment used to create monuments across the country in the 1880s. Other rides spun us by ponds with twanging bullfrogs and by side trails closed to protect nesting northern goshawks.

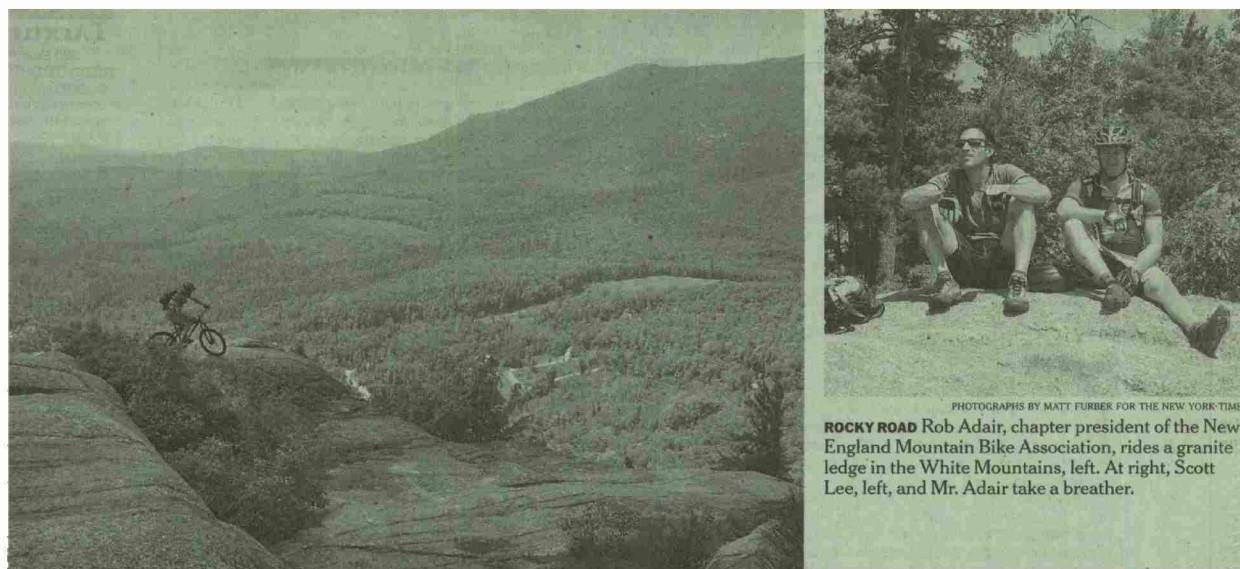
We also crossed two of the steel and wood bridges that Mr. Adair designed and built with fellow volunteers after

they secured federal grants.

Wrapping up my New Hampshire riding adventure, I pedaled with Michael Hartrich, a pioneer of modern rock climbing in the White Mountains; Muriel Mitchell, a mother of five who rides four days a week; her son Micah; Ms. Huemmler; and Mr. Jenks. As I bid them farewell they were already planning their next adventure.

"The mountain bike community in the White Mountains is alive and well. The nice thing about it is you can get as involved as you want," Ms. Huemmler said. "Everyone brings something to the table, and not necessarily trail work. Some make delicious meals, drive, organize events, lead rides, do bike repair ... it all goes smoothly without any pressure to do more."





PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT FURBER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ROCKY ROAD Rob Adair, chapter president of the New England Mountain Bike Association, rides a granite ledge in the White Mountains, left. At right, Scott Lee, left, and Mr. Adair take a breather.

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